



# SERIOUS PHOTO STUFF

Season 1 Episode 6 June 2013

# Always **SERIOUS** PHOTO STUFF

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*Cover:*  
*Nikon D50, AF Nikkor*  
*28-200mm 3.5-5.6D*

*Kodak Retina S2*  
*Fujichrome Sensia 100*



Jessica Raetzke teaches and makes art. I especially like her photography. I pretended to sit down with her to ask her some real questions about her work, influences, and docents.

# Jessica Raetzke: the interview

*SPS: I discovered your web page, [jbraetzke.com](http://jbraetzke.com), where you present some of your work. You have a talent for pattern and composition. And I find the (a)part photos hilarious. Thanks for sharing.*

*Please introduce yourself. For example, I live in Montreal. I'm a technical writer because it pays some of my bills. I'm lucky that it's also rewarding and challenging work. But there are some creative things that I can't do at the office. Serious Photo Stuff is my most recent attempt at preventing my transformation into mental mashed bananas; sweet but useless for supporting heavy structures.*

*Let's start with technical workflow. Analog, digital, both? Darkroom? Scanner? Computer? Software? Other tools?*



*Let's move on to creative workflow. How much preparation do you do before you start shooting? How much effort do you put into post-processing?*

JR: Oddly, I had not meant for those to be as humorous as they ultimately turned out to be, and I'm very glad you find them hilarious. It's always nice to have your work complimented.

So here is my introduction.

Having spent all of my life in a state of nomadic flux, I seem to have found myself in the same place for more than a few years teaching art at a small liberal arts college in the southeast [of the USA]. It has always been my goal to teach, so I am fortunate to be in a good place, doing what I love for a living which then allows me the opportunity to make artwork for my sanity.

I was recently gifted an old twin lens reflex. I've been making work with that pretty exclusively since the fall of last year. The two years before that almost all of the work I exhibited was created on a cell phone. I prefer to think I choose equipment based on the needs of the images I'll be making, but the truth is most probably that I use the camera I find most interesting at that particular time. Depending on the project, I may even vacillate. (a)part was created using both a large format and a compact digital camera.

I do tend to prefer the physicality of film. I suppose this is similar to my interest in reading text. I am comfortable reading

short articles on electronic devices, but my books are almost exclusively printed material. Not sure what that says about my digital photos. Having recently lost a hard drive with three years of digital work on it, I suppose there must be some connection there.

I have my negatives processed and scanned by a company I've been happy with. Though I am adept at photo editing software, my preference is for minimal correction and post-production. I do what little needs to be done to make solid prints. Giving up some of the more time consuming aspects of using photography as an artistic medium has freed me up to actually make more work. That's really what I'm most interested in.

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I have always been fascinated with cinematography. I think the storyboards for films can tell you a great deal about what the director is thinking before the editing and post-production occur. I took a similar approach to my photographs. As narrative had been such an important aspect of my work, my

sketchbooks allowed me to share my ideas with whomever I was photographing at the time. I eventually stopped using other people in my photographs and discontinued the use of sketching the photos beforehand. Because of this, I found myself being more spontaneous, especially in (a)part. Much of that series was pre-visualized, but because there was no “script” per se, I ended up with images that I had not intended to make.

I used to do all of my own processing, scanning, printing, framing, and even the installation, when I could. I was determined to have a hand in all of the steps between my idea and a photograph on exhibition. As much of my spare time is now taken up by a wiry-haired dog and a need to travel, I prefer to pay others for their expertise. Perhaps a product of maturation, I just don't have the interest that I used to in controlling everything.

*Who are your favourite filmmakers? Does cinematography still influence your art? What other influences do you have, photographic, cinema, or otherwise?*

*Once I was at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts looking at a piece that made no sense to me. I asked rhetorically what the hell the artist was trying say. My sister answered non-rhetorically that sometimes an artist isn't trying to make a direct statement so much as share something that the artist discovered. If you close your eyes and imagine that this spectrum makes sense, could you place yourself in it?*

Some of my my favorite directors are Alfred Hitchcock, Stanley Kubrick, Akira Kurosawa, and Paul Thomas Anderson. Odd that only one is contemporary, but these are the first that come to mind. I think of photography most when I think of cinematography, particularly the work of Gregory Crewdson. “Lighting for Film” was title of the cinematography course at university. I wasn’t able to take it, but I thought, “well, that’s what I’m doing anyway.” I just prefer to use natural, rather than artificial, light. I’m not really gear or technically oriented as an artist, but I love the idea of inventing lenses to film in candlelight, as Kubrick did in “Barry Lyndon”. Candle light as brush stroke. It’s quite amazing.

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**He pointed to the cinder block and said,  
“She’s got that tied around her ankle and it  
will help her fall faster.”**

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To be honest, one of my biggest influences recently has been a deadline. I’ve found it difficult to juggle work and art making in the last year. I don’t remember anyone really ever talking about this at university, or even outside, until I asked. It seems one of those experiences you just have occasionally. Everyone I meet, everything I read, watch, eat, listen to, or look at is something I file away, usually as research for the classes I teach. Sometimes something just jumps out at me

that relates to my own work. More often than not, it's literature that sparks an idea for my work, though I've not much time to read for pleasure lately, which may explain my current situation.

I think your question is best answered by a story. This is from a docent at a museum my work was exhibited in.

A large group of school children, second or third graders, came to the museum for an afternoon. At some point, towards the end of the tour, the docent asked the children if they could pick one piece of art out and tell a story about that work. After a short time a little boy raised his hand and stepped forward. The docent asked him to show the group which piece he wanted to tell a story about. She told me he walked right over to a photograph of mine on the far wall and pointed up at it (the (a)part piece with the cinder block overlooking the balcony). She asked if he would like to share his story with the group. He started by talking about how the lady holding the brick was thinking really hard. She asked, "what is she thinking of?" He said, very plainly, according to the docent, "she's trying to decide if she's going to jump." The docent, though surprised, took this in stride. "What makes you think she's going to jump?" He pointed to the cinder block and said, "She's got that tied around her ankle and it will help her fall faster." Stunned, the docent smiled, complimented him on his very imaginative mind, and moved on to the next child.

I don't know what that says about that little boy's imagination or life experience, or what it says about me that I was happy



to hear about the docent's experience with that little boy. But I think that is exactly what I want for people to get out of my work. Not that story exactly, as that was completely not my intention. In fact, I had no intended narrative for that particular image at all. I just had an idea that photographing a woman holding a cinder block on a balcony might make for an interesting image. I want people to connect to a story, any story. My story for the images is the least important, to me.

May I ask what got you interested in photography?

*To be continued.*

SPS

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*Retina S2  
Ilford Delta 100 Caffinol-C*

**I'm right  
behind you**



*Argus 21 Markfinder  
Agfa RSX II 100 expired*

Episode S01 E02 of **SPS** had vertical street photography. The higher altitude hid the identifies my subjects. An unexpected benefit was the absence of distraction. I got to capture what people were doing, not what they looked like.

Then I thought of another challenge: how can I get closer to my subjects without interrupting them and without recording their identities?

My answer: get behind them.

Anyone can take a picture from a distance. It takes nerve to creep up close behind someone before snapping. If I were a hunter, this would be the equivalent of swapping a sniper rifle for a bow and arrow.





*Retina S2*  
*Delta 100 Caffinol-C*



*Markfinder  
RSX II*



*Retina S2*  
*Delta 100 Caffenol-C*





*Retina S2*  
*Delta 100 Caffenol-C*

Stealth is important when you're this close. In some of these photos, I was using the Argus 21, which is almost as quiet as Stompin' Tom's right foot at the Sudbury Arena.

Too soon?

When I was caught, my subjects were charmed by the old, retro device behind them and didn't threaten violence for taking an unsolicited picture.

They also liked the camera I was holding.

Another thing I learned about this set of photos is colour. I notice that I prefer B&W film in the winter and colour for more colourful seasons. Looking at these photos, this unwitting decision was a good one. I like how the B&W film works well with winter's monochrome of snow, no greenery, dark clothing, grey skies. I'd say it removes another distraction, drawing the viewer's attention to the subject.

SPS



Jessica is back, this time for oatmeal, cringing, and hesitant self-promotion.

# Jessica Raetzke: wrath of the interview

*SPS: So I'm not the only one who connected to your photos for reasons you didn't anticipate. Also, I've never met a docent before.*

*To answer your question: I work as a technical writer for a medical software company. My university degree is a double-concentration in English and computer science. This combination is a pattern, so please stay with me.*

*I like devices. I'm drawn to the contrast between a device's simplicity and the complexity of the result you can produce with it. I get a kick out of this irony, elegance, purpose, potential. A sailboat is nothing but a hull and some fabric. But*

*you can travel around the entire planet with it! A camera is nothing but chamber that exposes a surface to light. But you can record images with it!*

*A couple of years ago, I ditched the department store point & shoot and bought a “real” camera, a DSLR. I dusted off shelves for trophies. I got cases of tissues for wiping the tears of deep emotion that would be shed while admiring my work. It’s all in the camera, how could I fail?*

*From that failure, I decided to educate myself. The corner magazine stand was productive at first. But the month-to-month repetition pushed me to the local university library. I learned that cameras don’t take pictures, people make pictures. Anyone can snap a shutter. It’s the practice, timing, dedication, preparation, and imagination that we do before and after that holds the real potential.*

*So I started with the technical part and now I’m learning about the vast artistic aspect of it. (There’s that compelling contrast again.)*

*Back to you: You mention your previous travelling and present desire to resume it. But [jbraetzke.com](http://jbraetzke.com) concentrates on more domestic subjects, like kitchens and gardens. Are they separate things or connected?*

JR: I’m big with the kids.

For the most part, the docents I have met are usually retirees with an interest in art. They volunteer at museums to do tours.

I would like to be a docent, but I would likely get too excited about some work, ignore other pieces, and set off the alarms that tell you that you are too close to the artwork.

Others detest the formality of them, but I quite enjoy the velvet ropes found at some museums. Though in a recent trip to Chicago, I noticed the preference now seems to be for small, unobtrusive barriers with what looks like fishing line. More subtle, I suppose.

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**Did you invest in handkerchiefs? When not used for dusting off trophies and giant-sized cardboard checks, they make good reusable tissues.**

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May I ask, this is likely a naive question, but do you write directions for medical software? I've no idea what technical writing is. I feel I should. Now I am chastising myself for not knowing this, and for pointing out my ignorance. Let us move on.

Did you invest in handkerchiefs? When not used for dusting off trophies and giant-sized cardboard checks, they make good reusable tissues.

Your comment about sailboats makes me think of dry docks. There's nothing sadder than a boat in dry dock. There was some comparison I've been sitting on in regard to yachts and canoes, but I've since forgotten. Again, I'll move on.

Funny you call the DSLR a "real" camera. I've had many conversations about photography with people I have passing relationships with; my GP, an office secretary, an acquaintance of an acquaintance. The one thing all of these conversations have in common is their indignation that their purchase of an expensive camera has not resulted in appropriately expensive looking photographs. I usually suggest a book, website, or videos to help with the technical issues that arise, but rarely discuss the issue of creativity. How do you tell someone who just spent three thousand dollars on a camera, that the reason their photos are not interesting is because they have no eye?

A close friend once asked me about the difference between being an artist who uses photography as their primary medium and being a photographer. He asked for my honest response. We had a lengthy discussion about why I wouldn't call him an artist, since he had a really nice expensive camera and studio equipment he thought that title apt. I explained I also wouldn't call myself a photographer, given my own equipment acquisitions he thought that strange. Was he giving too much credence to a large purchase and name brand recognition? Was I being elitist, because of my education? Was I being pretentious, given my aversion to wedding photography and studio portraits? I cringe when I call myself



an artist, not just because I am full of self-doubt and uncertainty, but because it always seems a little pretentious and I've never been good at self-promotion.

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**You can use an oatmeal box to make the most interesting, beautiful, challenging, and thought provoking photograph.**

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Your comment about practice, timing, dedication, preparation, and imagination is really at the heart of what I teach my students. You can use an oatmeal box to make a photograph, and that can be the most interesting, beautiful, challenging, and thought provoking photograph I will see all week. It's important to understand the technical aspects of whatever method you use to get your point across, but in the end no viewer really cares if you used house paint or oils, just what they get out of the work. If you learn the basics, you can learn to manipulate them to serve your needs.

I prefer embroidered handkerchiefs. They don't have to be frilly, just always impressed to see them pulled out. Though I've yet to see someone cry at the sight of one of my pieces. Perhaps that's a good thing.

Yes, I often dream of traveling. Despite recent public opinion, higher ed does not equate to limited hours and 4 months off in

the summer. It's been a few years since I dusted off my passport, but I've no preference as to domestic or foreign travel. There's nothing like a good trip to get you out of old habits and out of doors. I had not considered that so much of my work looked domestic. It does, I agree. The thing is, it's usually not my own domestic space. Most of these are borrowed or temporary residences, similar to the way some of my work doesn't rely on original images. I borrow places the same way I appropriate memories. I grew up moving a lot. I never got that out of my system, so I tend to move a lot within my photographs even when I'm settled somewhere. Though, in my mind, that doesn't really track, because so much of my work is about not fitting in. To be a part of something and apart from it occur simultaneously, but in spaces familiar and unknown. It's a bit of the uncanny, which may also make it humorous for viewers. That "a part/apart" statement was a shining moment of wit. It happened a few years ago. I'm still hoping for a few more of those at some point.

I think everything I do is connected to where I am at that particular moment. I have never worked on more than one project at a time, and don't know that I really could. I've also never worked on anything that didn't directly relate to my life at that point. No one would see it, but I was struggling when I started (a)part. I wasn't doing what I thought I needed to, so I just started photographing my frustration, however that manifested itself. In other projects I was trying to confer memory and decipher what memories were my own versus that of popular culture or familial history. The video work I did was based on my extensive traveling at that time. I make work

about where I am at and what I am doing at that particular moment. I don't always see it that way at the time, but with hindsight comes clarity. I'm not sure what I'm working on now, except that I seem to be back to doing domestic work that is both my own and other people's. I was told in graduate studies that there is always a thread that courses its way through your work, whether or not you know it's there. Ultimately, whether you choose to or not, you will always make work that relates to that thread. It may be a different iteration, you may change as an artist over the course of your life, but you will look back and see that thread. Some are fortunate and know what it is from the start, others take a bit more time to figure that out.

What do you prefer to make photographs of?

*Yes, I write directions for medical software. There's this big system that doctors, technicians, administrators, and clerks use to help patients. I get to explain to them how to use this system. It's also difficult to design and build, so I get to learn about dealing with these complexities then share with my colleagues.*

*We sometimes call ourselves "technical communicators" or "information developers". Maybe you're more familiar with those? I'm just kidding. It's not like we solve the world's problems with nothing but words and diagrams. But we do. Trivia: I just learned that CJ Chilvers, of [alessorphotographer.com](http://alessorphotographer.com), is also a technical writer by profession.*

*I have no handkerchiefs, but I'm impressed that people create such pretty things for the purpose of personal hygiene.*

*Your explanation of (a)part throws me off a bit. Your perspective didn't even cross my mind at first. But now, when I look at these images there's a bittersweetness and tension that was always there. Well done.*

*You make photos and, so far, I've been taking them. My photos are of scenes that interest me, that I'm curious about, the sort of subjects and techniques that you see in the popular photo magazines. My goal is to work my way to making photos of things that nobody knows yet, including myself, possibly about myself. To the list of practice, timing, dedication, preparation, and imagination, I think I'll add vision and courage.*

*My last question: Is there anything you'd like to promote, either your own work or someone else's? Also, I concentrated on your photography but [jbraetzke.com](http://jbraetzke.com) shows other media too.*

*Thank you for agreeing to this. It was fun and enlightening for me. I'm looking forward to seeing more of your work in the future.*

*I like those titles. Sounds like "customer confusion specialist" or "cultural education adviser". I checked out the "Lesser Photographer". I can see the interest there.*

I apologize for throwing you. After I read your email, I wondered if I had not somehow made my work less interesting to you as a viewer. I rarely write about my work for that reason.

Those are admirable additions to your list. I will borrow heavily from it in future.

I am not sure who/what to promote. I'm not very good at self-promotion, though I appreciate the need for it.

I have been moving out of my apartment this week (moving into a house in the same town). As weeks go, this one has been rather strange, but I will list the things I have been taken with this week, not sure that it's promotion.

1. camera bags—these are as essential as the camera they may hold. a good bag can save you thousands of dollars when accidents happen based on poor decision making.
2. white walls—apartment living often means bare white walls, without the ability to paint over their bland existence. moving into an apartment, white walls are like a blank canvas, you can do anything you like with them (hanging of artwork). moving out, white walls are sad and create an echo that reminds one of emptiness.
3. the U.S. postal service—people should send more letters, not just to me, but in general. I frequently send postcards to a handful of people, but primarily use the post office for packages (my mother lives in Costa Rica and I still like to

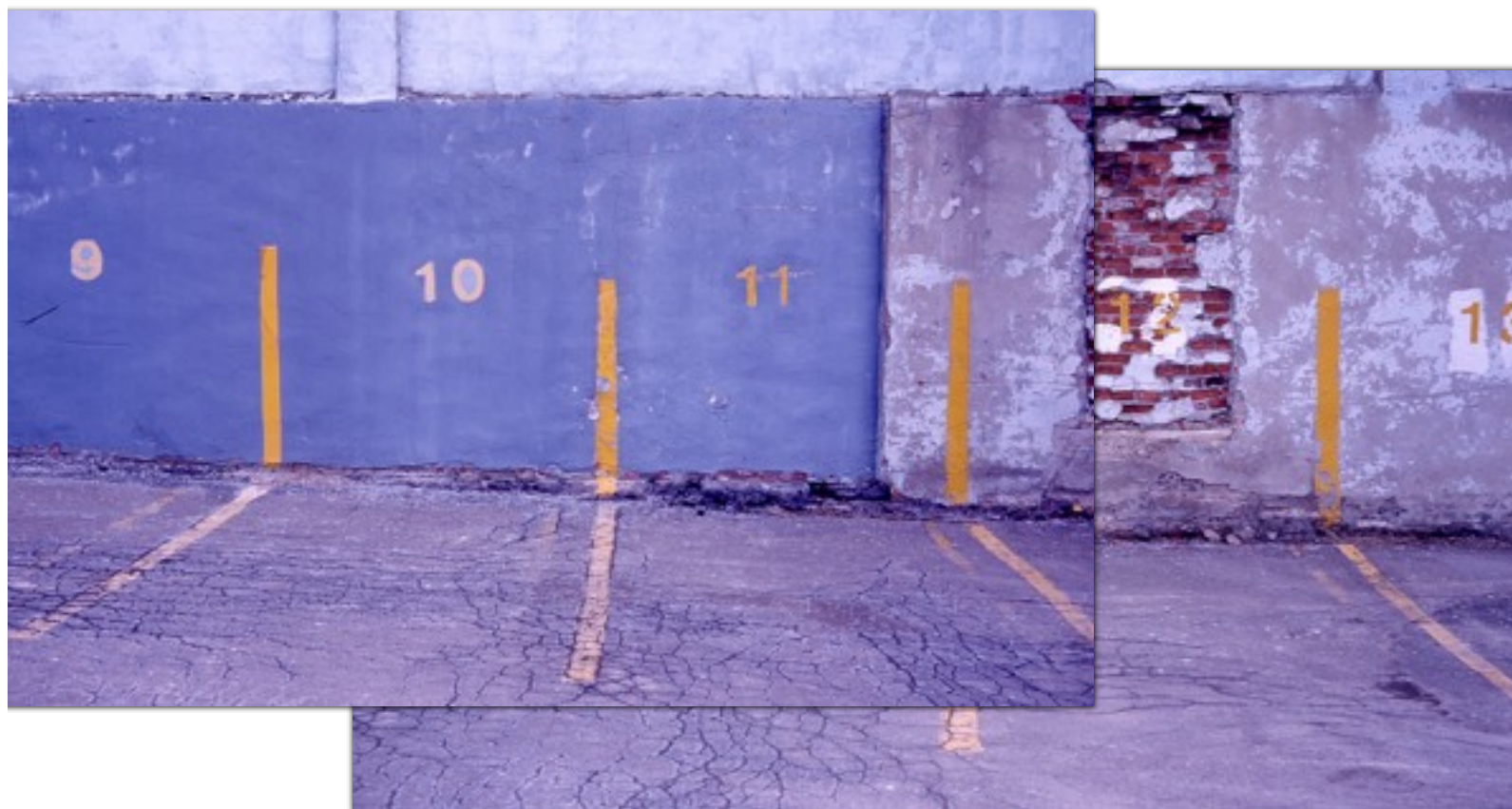
send art this way). I paid for priority, it got there next day. I don't think I've ever gotten an email from a gallery thanking me for my shipping choice.

4. 35 mm slides—revisiting suitcases full of slides telling the stories of a family's history. I tell all my students to ask their parents (though it's likely grandparents at this point), if they have an old 35mm camera. I think I shall start asking them to inquire about slides.

I tend to focus on photography myself. The video work was born out of necessity and a more visceral experience, while the mixed media came out of a need to experiment.

I had a great time doing this! It was a pleasure!

SPS





**So much to see, so much to snap in summer. Sweet.  
Alliteration. Always.**

# **Don't forget your camera**

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**58TH ANNUAL PORSCHE PARADE**

June 23-29, Traverse City, MI, USA

[parade2013.pca.org](http://parade2013.pca.org)

**FESTIVAL INTERNATIONAL DE JAZZ DE MONTREAL**

June 28-July 7, Montreal, Canada

[www.montrealjazzfest.com](http://www.montrealjazzfest.com)

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